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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MEXICO 001276

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SUBJECT: H1N1 INFECTS MEXICAN POLITICS

REF: A. MEXICO 1269
[1](#)B. MEXICO 1260

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: While the Government of Mexico (GOM) generally got high marks for its response to the H1N1 flu outbreak, communication at times was lacking between federal and state health authorities, and in Mexico City the three main parties representing federal, state and local efforts often did not coordinate operations. The PRI Governor of the State of Mexico and the PRD Mayor of Mexico City, potential presidential candidates in 2012, worked independently of the federal government, raising questions about whether they sought political advantage. Separately, some commentators suggested the GOM had used the crisis to divert attention from security problems in the country. With the outbreak turning out less serious than first believed, it is not unlikely some of the government's political opponents could fault it for overreacting. It remains unclear how the government's performance will play into the midterm elections. End Summary.

Government Responsiveness and Coordination

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Mexican public thus far has generally approved of the federal government's handling of the H1N1 flu outbreak, according to preliminary public opinion polls. Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova was given high marks for addressing questions raised by the press in regular public briefings. Although President Calderon was criticized for keeping a low profile at the beginning of the crisis, he recently made two televised addresses to the nation. He tried to pre-empt criticism that his administration overreacted to the flu, indicating that it had saved lives and allowed the rest of the world to prepare for the epidemic. Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidate Adriana Terrazas, however, argued that the current outbreak was a "distraction" maneuver by the federal government, to divert attention from the true "pandemic" of crime and violence. Ruling National Action Party (PAN) National President German Martinez Cazares, however, dismissed the notion that politics had influenced the government's response.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Each of the three major parties assumed a major role at the epicenter of the crisis in the Mexico City metropolitan area, but coordination was uneven. Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard from the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) held his own news conferences and

issued his own decrees, including the controversial decision to close Mexico City establishments including restaurants, bars, theaters, gyms, etc. and institute a city code alert system. At the same time, he made his first trip to Los Pinos, the presidential residence, in the three years since Felipe Calderon was elected, for a meeting of Mexican governors. At the meeting, Calderon reportedly called for stepped up communication about the disease between federal and state health authorities.

¶4. (SBU) PRI State of Mexico Governor Enrique Pena Nieto pointedly decided not to close local establishments though many appear to have closed on their own. Local PAN leaders maintained that the governor had sought political gain over the crisis with frequent public appearances in the place of his health secretary. The PRD filed a complaint with the State of Mexico Electoral Institute claiming the city of Nezahualcoyotl had distributed letters with a personal message from the governor about the success of the state's efforts. More recently, the governor has proposed Mexico undertake an international campaign to improve the global perception of Mexico and stimulate the tourism industry.

Political Reaction to the Stimulus Package

¶5. (SBU) In an attempt to mitigate the economic impact of the H1N1 virus, the Government of Mexico (GOM) announced a USD 1.4 billion stimulus package in the form of a number of tax breaks. PRI Senate leader Manlio Fabio Beltrones maintained that the package was "insufficient" and that "the federal government should make a better effort to attend to the

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(tourism) sector." Mexico City Finance Secretary Mario Delgado also criticized the package, arguing that it was "insufficient in terms of size and timing to tackle the scale of the crisis." Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard had already expressed reservations regarding the federal measures, arguing that "there should be a national effort (to rescue the economy) comparable to the current health measures...Isolated measures will not suffice...to overcome the challenge we are facing." Nuevo Leon business leaders were highly critical of the government's plan to reduce taxes to support businesses hurt by H1N1 flu closings, calling the measures absurd. They told the local press that the package was a farce, as the government already was unable to collect the taxes that were reduced in the relief plan.

H1N1 and Elections

¶6. (SBU) Even as the campaign season for midterm elections began May 3, large political rallies of more than 40 people were discouraged. With big rallies ruled out, campaigns are pouring more money into virtual outreach through the internet and even text messages. Nonetheless, the "legitimate government" website of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) reported that 2000 followers attended an event in Tabasco this week, in which AMLO politicized the flu issue. President Felipe Calderon "alarmed people through the media and spread fear among Mexicans," he said. The PRD claims that Calderon is using the crisis for political gain.

¶7. (SBU) Federal deputy candidates in Chihuahua seized on the flu epidemic for their campaigns. PRD candidates Xochitl Flores and Jose Luis Olivas announced their intention to distribute hundreds of packages with bleach and detergents among their electorate, as well as yellow surgical masks with their party logo. PAN candidate Hector Hernandez announced that he would start his campaign by distributing surgical masks and information leaflets on the current flu epidemic. Other candidates have also stamped the masks with their names and party logos.

Xenophobia and Trade

¶18. (SBU) Meanwhile, members of the Permanent Commission of Congress, a body that sits weekly during the periods that the full Senate and Chamber of Deputies are in recess, called for the federal government to condemn "xenophobia" against Mexicans abroad due to the flu outbreak. Much of the indignation was directed toward China, where groups of Mexicans had been quarantined. PRI Senator Recardo Cervantes accused China of lacking the moral ground to judge Mexico on public safety issues, pointing to its history of producing products manufactured with toxic materials. Mexican authorities sent an airplane to China to transport the dozens of Mexicans who had been held in quarantine despite the fact that none had shown any flu-like symptoms. They returned to a hero's welcome and were received by Mexico's First Lady.

¶19. (SBU) The Mexican Council of Foreign Trade (COMCE) reported that Mexican exports also are being "discriminated" against at foreign borders around the world. Many Mexican shipments are being detained for more than 48 hours in order to allow for exhaustive inspections by customs agents. In a joint press release, the governments of the U.S., Canada and Mexico asked the world not to use the H1N1 flu as a trade barrier, and reiterated that their governments are doing everything they can to control effectively the outbreak. During a speech in Michoacan, Calderon remarked that the demonization of Mexican products and people was unwarranted and described the return of the Mexican aid ship from Haiti as "unnecessary". The Foreign Relations Secretariat (SRE) issued a statement to the UN, urging it to stop the discriminatory measures many countries are taking against Mexican citizens.

U.S. Scores Points

¶10. (SBU) Most media continue reporting good relations

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between Mexico and the U.S. One columnist noted, "While our Latin American 'brothers' have turned their back on us during this difficult time, Barack Obama has shown us more than one gesture of kindness and solidarity." Assistant Secretary for Health Mauricio Hernandez acknowledged the 400,176 doses of Tamiflu and the USD 7 million donated by the USG. He also gave special thanks to the U.S. for keeping its 3000 mile long border open.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: While most still believe the GOM may have prevented a major outbreak, there is a growing sentiment in some circles that government officials overreacted and unnecessarily hurt the economy, especially in the services and tourism sectors. The GOM's new GDP growth forecast for 2009, adjusted to include the maximum negative 0.5 percent impact of H1N1, now stands at negative 4.5 percent. Independent analysts believe the economy could shrink even further -- maybe even as much as 5.9 percent. The outbreak managed to overshadow the drug war, which continues to cause heavy casualties. At this juncture it remains unclear which party, if any, will reap the greatest advantage from the flu crisis. End Comment.
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